

For Your Information

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Last Saturday, on June 29, I was honored to speak in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to the Ahmadiyya Muslim American Community's 65th Annual Convention.

For the past several years, the Ahmadiyya have chosen Harrisburg for their convention, just days before America's July 4 celebration.

Two hours east of Harrisburg is Philadelphia, where our Declaration of Independence was signed on that date. Less than an hour south is Gettysburg, where 150 years ago, in the days leading up to July 4, a crucial Civil War battle was raging.

Philadelphia is where America, through its Declaration, proclaimed that people are born equal and free. Gettysburg is where the nation, through an otherwise terrible war, began to turn those words more fully into deeds, leading to a new birth of freedom upon the abolition of slavery. And last Saturday, Harrisburg was where we reaffirmed America's declaration that freedom -- including freedom of religion or belief -- is not just for Americans, but for everyone, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and others.

Founded in India in 1889, the Ahmadiyya community is known for its respect for tolerance and freedom. Claiming tens of millions of adherents worldwide, its members have lived in our country for nearly a century. Following 9/11, America's Ahmadiyya community literally gave its blood for our nation, eventually donating over 25,000 live-saving units in memory of those who fell that day.

While in many ways, Ahmadiyya precepts mirror our values, these values continue to come under harsh assault globally.

Nearly three-fourths of the world's people live in nations where freedom of religion and related human rights are under brutal siege. That includes millions of Ahmadiyya members.

For nearly four decades, the constitution of Pakistan has deemed all Ahmadiyya “non-Muslims.”

For more than a quarter century, its government has barred them from calling their worship centers “mosques,” publicly uttering the traditional Islamic greeting or quoting from the Qur’an, and displaying Islam’s basic affirmation. Ahmadiyya are prohibited from sharing their beliefs with others or disseminating their material. They are restricted from building houses of worship and holding public gatherings. And since they must register as non-Muslims to vote, Ahmadiyyas effectively are disenfranchised.

Coupled with Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, these statutes have helped foster a climate of intimidation and violence against Ahmadiyya members.

In Indonesia, since June 2008, the government has restricted Ahmadiyya activity to private worship and prohibited members from sharing their faith. In parts of East and West Java and elsewhere, extremist religious groups press local officials to close places of worship or ban Ahmadiyya activity altogether.

In Saudi Arabia, Ahmadiyya members have been deported for their beliefs. In Egypt, they have been charged under its blasphemy laws. In Kazakhstan, the government’s application of its Religion Law has denied their legal legitimacy.

The same societies that violate the religious freedom of Ahmadiyya abuse the rights of others. As USCIRF has documented, where Ahmadiyya suffer, Hindus and Christians, Sikhs and Baha'is, Shi'a and other Muslims, often are persecuted as well.

In order to protect the rights of all, including the Ahmadiyya, and foster peaceful, stable societies, Washington needs to make religious freedom a key foreign policy priority.

The U.S. government also should confront nations which single out the Ahmadiyya for persecution. For example, it should press Pakistan to amend its constitution and rescind all anti-Ahmadiyya laws. It should urge Indonesia to overturn its 2008 decree and all provincial bans against Ahmadiyya religious practice. It should press both governments to investigate acts of violence thoroughly and prosecute perpetrators vigorously. And until Pakistan proves itself serious about reform, USCIRF believes that it qualifies as a "country of particular concern."

Today, we honor our founding Declaration. We remember that freedoms are not privileges for rulers to bestow or withhold, but unalienable rights ordained by a just and merciful Creator, which no person or government can abuse without surrendering moral authority and legitimacy.

**Katrina Lantos Swett is the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).*

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact USCIRF at (202) 523-3258 or media@uscirf.gov.